



Left: *Mutterhulse*, 2007. Alpolic, 86 x 68 x 73 in. Above: *Shortest Distance*, 2006. Stainless steel, 9 x 12 x 17 ft. Work installed at the U.S. Courthouse, Eugene, OR.

Once Bruch rejected his leftist enthusiasms in favor of labor-intensive, enigmatic objects, the regional and national honors, awards, grants, and residencies began arriving. Ironically, Bruch's failure as an engaged political artist led to his acclaim as a formalist. As art critic Lyn Smallwood put it, "Bruch's column of stacked garbage cans comically mimics modern abstract sculpture (in particular, Brancusi's *Endless Column*), typifying the combination of smoldering humor and historical awareness that animates Bruch's best art."²

Critical lip service remained admiring of Bruch's "lost" years in Seattle's run-down, national historic landmark district of Pioneer Square, where the city's leading art galleries found low-rent storefronts and began the region's art explosion in the mid- to late 1970s. His disillusionment with his initial direction echoed comparable lost opportunities among an older generation of Seattle artists. Buster Simpson's Belltown period (1975–85), was furtive, socially conscious, improvisatory, and generally ignored. (He received great acclaim by turning to the design and construction of official art in public places across the nation.)

Moving beyond neighborhood gutters, dumpsters, and politically incorrect satires of homeless encampments, Bruch settled on a meditative process of layering, forming, and centering that emerged out of his background as a ceramics major at the University of Kansas. Craft is the secret behind Bruch's large-scale sculptures. By drawing on a wide spectrum of ceramic approaches—throwing, centering, turning, surface decoration—Bruch joins other American artists who have reinvigorated contemporary sculpture through physical processes. In doing so, he has successfully transitioned from a dead-end 1970s mentality to an early 21st-century sensibility of carefully re-ordering materials rooted in indeterminate, subjective memory. Reversing the feminist saw, "The personal is the political,"

Bruch left the political for the personal and thereby reached a larger, more appreciative public.

Recently viewers were able to assess political and non-political works side by side in an abbreviated survey of Bruch's work at Lawrimore Project in Seattle. Not all of his most important works were available. For example, *Duty Cycle* (2000), a giant paper disk, was absent, as was *Mantle* (1997), another cut-and-glued paper work that resembles the human brain. Also missing were public art projects such as *Shortest Distance* (2006), for the Wayne Lyman Morse U.S. Courthouse in Eugene, Oregon.

Free to roam and confabulate large-scale structures out of, in some cases, seemingly unlikely materials (like paper), Bruch has retained the cardinal principles of classical Modernism, no longer parodying but extending such formal issues as verticality, complex shapes, materiality, and the occasional use of hermetic systems. Bruch's achievement has led to an extension of Modernism's goals for sculpture, without falling prey to the two-dimensional ideal of Clement Greenberg, the painting-as-model view of what sculpture should become. Instead, Bruch has fused two and three dimensions, perhaps an outgrowth of the importance of drawing in his work. Other works at Lawrimore Project affirmed the craft-based aesthetic in numerous ways. *Sketchbook* (2007) is a fiendishly illusionistic twisting of wood, paper, and graphite into an elaborately convoluted form. *Mutterhulse* (2007) uses the aluminum alloy Alpolic to create a curvy, seven-foot-tall, jewelry-like floor ornament. Its petaled sheen is a large part of its appeal. In *Murmur* (2001), *Perfect Landscape* (2007), and *What Do You Want to Talk About?* (2001), laminated, glued, and contorted pieces of wood create wildly improbable shapes that generate much discussion about meaning. This link to the handmade and, in turn, to making's relation to the body, has supplanted political ideology for Bruch. Transcending the ideological, he delves more deeply into the human reasons why art is made. Bruch has undergone a sea change experienced or contemplated by many other sculptors. Escaping politics, he has landed in another country, the land of the personal and the profound.

Notes

¹ The quotations are from Jen Graves, "The Artist in Labor," *The Stranger*, July 5, 2007, and Nate Lippens, "The Beauty of Bruch is in the Process," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 19, 2007.

² Lyn Smallwood, "'In Public' at First Glimpse," *Seattle Weekly*, July 10, 1991.

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